
The Antiquarians

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Historians and other sorts of antiquarians in Hawaii have been meeting to discuss the history of medicine since 1932 when the History of Medicine Society was formed. The Society was not long lived, but another group was established in 1964 called the Hillebrand Society which continued until 1972. History repeats itself and in 1992 the Hawaii Society for the History of Medicine and Public Health was founded.

Historians and other sorts of antiquarians are a necessary if curious breed. Usually the older members in a community, they serve as keepers of information that, without them, would be lost to younger folk, who are unaware of matters belonging to the past. This is a natural consequence of "the generation warp," as Dr D.M. Morens calls it in his latest report on the activities of the Hawaii Society for the History of Medicine and Public Health (long may it flourish!) For pertinent illustration about the need for antiquarians, most members of HSHMPH did not know until recently that their society has been preceded by at least two similar organizations, right here in Honolulu.

The first of those, bravely named The History of Medicine Society, was formally founded in March 1932. According to Mrs Nancy Nickell Fennel, who was there that evening, the organizing meeting was held at the home of Dr Hastings H. Walker, at that time on the staff of Leahi Hospital. Dr Henry L. Sigerist, the famous historian of medicine, had visited Hawaii in February. Dr Eric A. Fennel, Nancy's husband, and the pathologist at the Straub Clinic, took Dr Sigerist to see the Leper Settlement at Kalaupapa. On their return to Honolulu, Dr Sigerist confessed to Mrs Fennel that he had been scared to death by the terrors of the mule trail leading from topside Molokai to the Settlement far below.

Obviously, during his stay in Honolulu, Dr Sigerist stirred up some interest in the history of medicine among local physicians. In a reminiscing and undated letter she wrote many years later (to an unknown recipient), Nancy Fennel named the distinguished physicians who gathered at Dr Walker's home in Manoa Valley on that evening in March 1932:

N.E. Wayson, USPHS, stationed at the Kalihi Receiving Station (sometimes referred to as the Leprosy Investigation Station in Kalihi); Robert Perlstein, an associate of Dr Walker at Leahi Hospital; Harry L. Arnold, Sr, and Eric A. Fennel of the Straub Clinic; Nils P. Larsen and Francis Halford of the Medical Group; and Frank L. Pleadwell, Captain USN (Ret). During the evening, Bob Perlstein gave a talk on Robert Koch.

Alas for the iniquity of oblivion, as Sir Thomas Browne lamented, in distress for famous men of all times. Who among us today remembers even the names of those potent doctors in Hawaii's medical history or their contributions to our progress? They were virtually the daimyo, the great names, in the haole medical establishment of their time.

Apparently that first History of Medicine Society did not continue for long; nothing more is known about further meetings or later speakers. Without Nancy Fennel's gossipy letter, probably written

to Dr Charles S. Judd, Jr, or to Dr John Stephenson, we today would not know that it had led the way along which we follow. We need not wonder why that society did not endure. Those great men were too busy, professionally and socially, to spend many evenings listening to someone talk about the dead or dying past.

Yet, as is the way with all emerging generations, the need to think about the past persists in a few younger people. In the early 1960s, two energetic young physicians, able to look backward as well as forward, decided to create another society to consider the history of medicine: Dr John Stephenson, a pediatrician with the Straub Clinic, and Dr Charles S. Judd, Jr, a surgeon in private practice. With a fine sense of local history, they called it the Hillebrand Society.

Hillebrand you ask? Who was he to be so honored? Now nearly forgotten, Dr William Hillebrand (1821-1886) was one of Hawaii's most remarkable physicians and citizens during the 19th century. Trained in Germany, he arrived in Honolulu about 1851, accompanied by his wife and two young sons. After establishing a thriving practice here, he was chosen to be the first medical director of The Queen's Hospital when it was founded in 1859. His observations on patients seen both in the hospital and in his chambers caused him to warn the kingdom's Board of Health about the increasing numbers of lepers among native Hawaiians. This warning, of course, led to the Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy passed by the Legislature in 1865. In consequence, beginning in 1866, all persons suffering from Hansen's disease were segregated at the Leper Settlement on Molokai.

A botanist too, Hillebrand collected and classified most of the plants, both native and introduced, growing in Hawaii at that time. From this prodigious collection he prepared the manuscript for *Flora of the Hawaiian Islands*. Published posthumously in 1888, it was the best general authority on Hawaii's flora for more than 60 years.

In the mid 1860s, as the kingdom's roving commissioner for immigration traveling in Asia, Dr Hillebrand arranged for the importation of contract laborers to work on Hawaii's sugarcane plantations: More Chinese workers arrived in 1865 (the first group had come in 1852), and the first Japanese contract laborers, the celebrated *Gannen Mono*, arrived in 1868. Moreover, during his travels in Asia he sent back to Honolulu an assortment of interesting plants and birds to adorn his estate here. Many of the plants still grow just where he planted them in the preserve now known as the Foster Botanical Garden, because Mary E. Foster bought the property after Hillebrand and his family left the islands, about 1880. They settled in Montreux, Switzerland, where he completed the manuscript for his *Flora of the Hawaiian Islands*. Even there he continued to help Hawaii: he was the intermediary who advised Walter Murray Gibson, then president of the Board of Health, to invite Dr Eduard Arning, one of Europe's first physicians to be trained in the new discipline of bacteriology, to come to Hawaii in order to "study the problem of leprosy."

In short, because of his significant influence on the medical, the

social, and the natural history of Hawaii, Dr Hillebrand seemed to be a man deserving of honor by successors who shared his many interests.

And yet, unhappily, he is all but unknown today. No street is named for him, no building, no memorial of any kind, certainly not the society that bore his name, not even the botanical garden that he established around his home. *Hillebrand's Glen*, somewhere in Nuuanu Valley, was named for him, but now no one knows where to look for it.

The Hillebrand Society held its first official meeting on December 16, 1964 "in the corner of the main reference room of the [new] Hawaii Medical Library." (Naturally, obligatory refreshments were

served.) Dr Stephenson presided, Dr Judd served as scribe. His minutes reported that "Dr Ilza Veith, Professor of the History of Medicine at the University of California [Berkeley] was present, and gave some excellent counsel on the organization of the society." In a fated preview of this belated rerun, "Prof O.A. Bushnell presented an interesting biographical sketch of Dr William Hillebrand, physician and botanist, one of the great early doctors of Hawaii."

In 1966, following the example of his great-grandfather, Dr Gerrit P. Judd (who came to Hawaii as a medical missionary in 1828), Charlie Judd went with his family to Western Samoa for a two-year period of service. John Stephenson happily reported that in 1967 the

Hillebrand Society had 42 charter members. Then, in the fall of 1968, most untimely and much too young, Stephenson died. Upon his return from Samoa in that same year, Charlie Judd became the society's acting president.

And, at that time, Dr Windsor Cutting, dean of the University of Hawaii's newly founded medical school and a member of the Hillebrand Society, appointed Dr Judd the school's first professor of medical history, as well as a clinical professor of surgery.

Inevitably, some of those 42 charter members died or moved away. Most of the steadfast rest, predictably, having "a grand memory for forgetting," as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, did not bother to attend the meetings that diligent Dr Judd arranged for them. In 1972 he sensibly gave up the struggle to keep the Hillebrand Society alive.

Among the present generation of people who are interested in medical history few remembered that the Hillebrand Society had ever existed. Even sadder: No one knows whether or not comparable societies exist that are concerned with Hawaiian, Chinese, and Japanese medical history in these islands—or elsewhere.

Even so, as always, history does repeat. In 1992, a small group of hopeful folk founded the Hawaii Society for the History of Medicine and Public Health. Long may it flourish.

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